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# Painting in Canada

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# Painting in Canada

by Dennis Reid and David Burnett

Published by Authority of the  
Right Honourable Joe Clark,  
Secretary of State for External Affairs,  
Government of Canada, 1985

Produced by  
General Publications Section,  
Department of External Affairs,  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K1A 0G2.

Part 1 — *The development of painting in Canada* was written by Dennis Reid, curator of Canadian Historical Art, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Part 2 — *Painting in Canada since the Second World War* was written by David Burnett, independent curator and consultant, formerly curator of Contemporary Canadian Art, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

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## Part 1 — The development of painting in Canada

Human life in what is now Canada probably goes back 25 000 years to the first migrations across the frozen Bering Sea from northeastern Asia. Although it is likely that images have been made in this part of the world ever since, we are only now beginning to understand what has survived of this first Canadian painting, let alone the meaning of the imagery of the pictographs and hide or bark paintings that can be found across the country. What is clear is that, with the first settlement of Europeans, an entirely different visual language was introduced, unrelated to the aboriginal forms.

### *Devotional works*

Painting in the western European tradition, the foundation of virtually all that has been produced in Canada since, was introduced with the arrival at Quebec in September 1654 of the first resident painter, Abbé Hugues Pommier (1637-86). Pommier, a priest who happened to paint, stayed five years before returning to France. Although two or three paintings have been attributed to him, we know of no work that is surely from his hand, and this uncertainty extends to our knowledge of the whole period of New France.

In the *Monastère des Ursulines* at Quebec there is a canvas grandly titled *France Bringing the Faith to the Hurons of New France* that is a mysterious and beautiful symbol of the place of art in the French colonial period. One of the few seventeenth century paintings to survive the many fires, it depicts a humble native on the banks of the St. Lawrence River, his naked body cloaked in the lilies of France, kneeling in respectful awe before a regal female, the figure of France, who instructs him in the Christian faith. She displays a painting of the Trinity surrounded by the Holy Family, and, as if to stress that it is but an image, she points to the heavens where we can see the Holy Family itself. To the left of the Indian are two rude chapels, and to the right of the figure of France lies the ship that brought her across the ocean.

We do not know the painting's author, although it is usually attributed to Frère Luc, the only artist to work in New France who is firmly linked to the mainstream of French painting. Commissioned in 1666 for the Jesuit church at Quebec by the Hurons who had settled nearby, its figure of France is a likeness of Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV, who exercised the prerogatives of the crown in place of her son from 1643 to 1660 — precisely that time

of zealous “missionizing” the painting symbolically represents. In style it is typical of provincial work of the second half of the seventeenth century — a naive and restrained variation on the grand symbolic masterpieces of Rubens or Poussin. Nonetheless, it represents simply the noblest intentions of the first Europeans in settling the St. Lawrence Valley, and proclaims directly the central role that French culture, particularly painting, would play in the realization of those intentions.

The importance of the missions had largely diminished by 1670 and interest focused on the growing white settlements, clearly in need of a skilled painter who could decorate the new churches in the manner to which Frenchmen were accustomed. Unfortunately, the tiny community was unable to support resident talent of that order, so an accomplished artist was brought in for a period of concentrated work. Frère Luc (1614-85) has since become the star round which the lesser constellations of early Canadian painting revolve. A cleric, as were all the painters who worked in New France in the seventeenth century, he was by far the best trained.

Frère Luc arrived in Quebec in August 1670 and stayed about 14 months, designing and supervising the construction of a Recollet chapel, and painting a number of devotional pictures, including a grand altar-piece for the chapel. Now in the *Hôtel Général de Québec*, this *Assumption* is a robust example of the French Classical Baroque. A little shallow, heavy in modelling, and rather stiff, even awkward, compared to the work of the artist's contemporaries in France, it must have appeared a very vision of beauty and of inspired religious emotion in Quebec in 1671.

By the early eighteenth century we have evidence of the first non-clerical painters working in New France, reflecting a gradual secularization of life as the colony grew. Paradoxically, this broadening interest in painting did not lead to an increase in the number or quality of painters working in the colony, craftsmen employed in various aspects of church decoration, some of whom also painted primitive portraits and charming, naive *ex votos*. They were trained by apprenticing, as was usual in all the trades, a tradition that persisted in Quebec well into the twentieth century. There were never enough painters in New France to warrant any other form of artistic organization. It was only after the British conquest of 1760 that in the wider and more secular sphere of British North America such moves seemed necessary or even desirable.

### *First artistic organization*

The first recorded organization to support an interest in the arts was the Halifax Chess, Pencil and Brush Club, founded in 1787. There were then no professional artists in that Atlantic port — established as a planned colonial town and

military post only 38 years before — and membership was drawn entirely from the moneyed class, gentlemen who considered the casual pursuit of water-colour painting in the British manner to be part of civilized life. This privileged society encouraged the settlement of Halifax's first resident professional artist, Robert Field (c. 1769-1819), an Englishman who had studied at the Royal Academy School in London before emigrating to the United States in 1794. Working throughout the eastern seaboard as a miniaturist, and as a portrait painter in the manner of Reynolds and Romney, the English masters of his youth, Field lived in Halifax from 1808 until 1816, by which time he had exhausted the local market. He then moved to Kingston, Jamaica.

Field's work is valued as a record of the early leaders of the Halifax community. Although it is only one of many provincial manifestations of the dominant English portrait style to be found throughout the British Empire, it reflects the desire of the local gentry to maintain meaningful links with the visual culture of the metropolitan centre. How unrealistic such aspirations were at the time is clear from the fact that the Halifax Chess, Pencil and Brush Club ceased to meet in 1817, shortly after Field's departure.

The situation was no better elsewhere in British North America in the early decades of the nineteenth century, despite the occasional talented painter such as William Berczy (1744-1813), who found himself in the colonies; he arrived as a leader of German settlers in Upper Canada in 1794, but ended up working as a painter and architect in Montreal and Quebec when land speculations soured. A small, scattered population in the wilderness could not support resident professional artists, although numerous strong, decorative portraits of the 1820s and 1830s have survived. Somewhat naive, with clear forms and intense patterning, they display a genuine vigour. Usually the work of itinerants who would settle in the larger communities for a month or two, they contributed little toward the development of indigenous structures for the arts.

### *Early watercolours*

Other than the portraiture of itinerants and the decorating of churches in Lower Canada (Quebec), the other prominent artistic activity was the habit of "taking views" in the picturesque tradition favoured by well-bred Englishmen. Officers in the imperial army and navy were trained in topography and many pursued it as a serious hobby while posted in Canada. Lieutenant-Colonel James Cockburn (1779-1847), for instance, has left hundreds of charming watercolours of his travels throughout Upper and Lower Canada during a ten-year posting to Quebec City in the late 1820s and early 1830s. There were serious watercolourists among the civilians as well. George Heriot (1759-1839), who lived in Quebec City from 1791 to 1816 — as deputy postmaster-general for

British North America after 1800 — also travelled from Detroit to Halifax, and has left hundreds of wonderful picturesque views. Though he lived in Quebec for 25 years, it is unlikely that Heriot contributed to any continuing tradition. Most of his work, like that of the British officers, was taken back to England.

### *Professional artists*

As a consequence of continuous immigration throughout the 1830s and 1840s, by mid-century Montreal and Toronto were developing as centres of some cultural significance, and we know of a small number of professional artists in each. In 1834 there was even an attempt to establish an exhibiting association. The Society of Artists and Amateurs of Toronto staged one exhibition that year, but no more. With the increase in the number of painters at mid-century, however, came attempts to develop a regular forum for professionals. The Toronto Society of Arts was established in 1847. The first exhibition limited to the work of professional artists was held that year, and another the following. Since there were not many artists in Toronto, American itinerants who had enjoyed support in Upper Canada were invited to contribute. Two portraitists recently settled in the city were included, and Paul Kane (1810-71) showed some of his first Indian pictures in the 1847 show. Kane held a one-man exhibition later in 1848, marking yet a new stage in the public appreciation of painting in Toronto.

Also in 1847, a group of professionals in Montreal who organized the Montreal Society of Artists eschewed a catalogued exhibition in favour of a 'permanent' picture gallery in the local Mechanics' Institute. From a published list of members we can see that, as in Toronto, they recruited far afield in order to swell the ranks, and itinerants were welcome. Topographical watercolours were popular in both exhibits and there were many portraits. Still-lives, classical landscapes in oil and historical scenes, were all copies made from reproductive engravings or while on trips to Europe.

As a junior exhibitor, Paul Kane had offered such things with the Society of Artists and Amateurs of Toronto in 1834 but, in 1847, rather than replicating subjects that reinforced cultural bonds with the traditional values of the old country, he showed Indian scenes from his travels to the far west that reflected unique aspects of the Canadian experience. With the Montreal Society of Artists it was the Dutch-born and German-trained Cornelius Krieghoff (1815-72) who filled that role, suggesting with his scenes of Indian and French-Canadian peasant life that Canada offered sufficient subjects for art. Montreal proved insufficient to support its first professional artists' society, however, and only two of its members remained by 1849. Krieghoff himself moved to Quebec in 1853.

Quebec, even though the principal British garrison in Canada, was a city that retained a strong sense of French culture, unlike Montreal, which for about two decades at mid-century was, for the only time in its history, predominantly English-speaking. It also carried with it the aura of a capital, as it had been the administrative centre of New France, and from 1851 to 1855 and 1859 to 1865 was the capital of the United Canadas. Indigenous traditions were there able to survive the successive waves of immigration, and this gave an artist like Joseph Légaré (1795-1855) the stability that arises only from a degree of security. The continuing demand for church decoration, although copy-work, assured a living.

Légaré, a remarkable man, had early purchased a large collection of seventeenth and eighteenth century pictures brought to Canada by two French priests who acquired them from speculators in France who, in turn, had taken them from religious structures looted during the French Revolution. Légaré's training was in repairing and copying these pictures, his income derived from the sale of copies, and by their display in his private museum in Quebec City. He also collected reproductive engravings. It was as though he had set out single-handedly to regain the heritage of European visual culture that had been threatened by the British conquest, and by that more subtle deterioration of links resulting from distance over time. At the same time Légaré turned his almost 'primitive', provincial late-Baroque style to Canadian subjects, knowing that he was building something unique. How well he built is attested to by the dynasty of painters he founded: his apprentice Antoine Plamondon (1802-95), and, in turn, his apprentice Théophile Hamel (1817-70), and *his* apprentice Napoléon Bourassa (1827-1916), dominating portraiture and church decoration in Quebec for the rest of the century.

By mid-century there were numerous and growing signs of stability in the cultural life of the anglophone parts of the country as well. The growth of institutional structures, it appears, could compensate for the lack of indigenous traditions. Immigrants simply brought their structures and traditions with them, and when the structures were not portable, they were reconstructed in the New World. It didn't always work. There was no guarantee that the kind of exhibiting societies flourishing in provincial centres in England in the early decades of the nineteenth century would prove successful in Canada. But then other ways were found when the demand warranted. The Upper Canada Provincial Exhibition, for instance, awarded art prizes every year from 1846, and with a professional category from 1852, even though it was primarily an agricultural and industrial fair. Similar forms developed in Lower Canada after mid-century, and in 1860 the first attempt was made there to establish a public art gallery.

### *Artists versus collectors*

The Art Association of Montreal (AAM), as it was called (today it is the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), was formed by a group of prominent anglophone Montrealers, following British and American models. Collectors, they had particular, stated goals; primarily the establishment of an annual loan exhibition and other facilities for artistic education. No catalogue survives of the first exhibition, held in May 1860, but the contents were described at the time as “paintings, photographs and objects of vertu, with some fine stereoscopes and microscopes”. The AAM was revived for a second exhibition in 1864, again a collectors’ show with which local artists were not directly involved. There was an 1865 showing, and another, less ambitious exhibition was held in 1867. The local artists, however, felt neglected. They formed the Society of Canadian Artists (SCA) in 1867, holding their first annual exhibition the following year, a show exclusively of Canadian artists’ work for sale.

The AAM and SCA avoided open conflict as the collectors on the one hand and the artists on the other pursued their respective interests. In fact, in April 1872 they held a joint exhibition. The following year, however, a massive economic depression settled on Canada, and both organizations suspended operations, the SCA never to revive.

The Depression hit hard in Montreal, where it had been preceded by a period of unprecedented economic growth. Hand in hand with that boom had been the expansion of Canadian territory. Manitoba had joined as the fifth province in May 1870, and in July the Hudson’s Bay Company lands, a vast expanse from north of the Great Lakes to the Arctic and west to the Rockies, were formally annexed by Canada. To complete the Dominion from sea to sea, British Columbia had agreed to enter Confederation if a railway was built to link it to Eastern Canada. By 1871 that tremendous project seemed to be under way.

### *Ontario Society of Artists*

Toronto benefited directly from the opening of the West, as its importance as a trans-shipment point began to grow. Indeed the “Western Metropolis”, as it was then popularly known, attracted businessmen and others, including some artists, from Montreal. One was John A. Fraser (1838-98), a London-born Scot who had settled in Montreal about 1860 when he joined the William Notman photographic firm. Fraser moved to Toronto in 1867 to set up a branch of the firm. Involved in the establishment of the SCA in Montreal, he saw that there was no similar group in Toronto — the Toronto Society of Arts had held its last exhibition in 1848 — and so organized the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA). The first exhibition was held in 1873 and, despite the Depression, others followed. The OSA still exists.

The exhibition and sale of members' pictures was the primary concern of the OSA, although it was soon involved in establishing a gallery and an art school. There was already a small art gallery of sorts in Toronto, the Canadian Educational Museum, located in the Toronto Normal School since 1857, which contained a collection of plaster casts, oil copies and reproductive engravings of the great masterpieces of European visual culture. What the OSA had in mind, however, was a permanent public display of the work of the community's artists. Problems of personality and organization developed during the first year, and John Fraser was replaced by Lucius O'Brien (1832-99), a masterful organizer with a clear view of long term goals. By June 1876 he had established the OSA in its own quarters in the heart of the city, and had by the fall established a school of art under the Society's auspices. It survives to this day as the Ontario College of Art.

### *National beginnings*

Things were improving in Montreal as well, and in May 1879 the AAM opened the first structure in Canada designed specifically as a public art gallery. Montreal was prepared to vie with Toronto for any claim to national predominance in the arts. And other cities, if not in competition, were ready to declare their intentions to pursue their own artistic goals. A group of collectors in Ottawa formed the Art Association of Canada in the summer of 1879, soon to be re-named the Ottawa Art Association. Local interests in London, Ontario, had formed the Western Art Union in 1877, and there would soon be a similar body in Winnipeg in the new province of Manitoba, and a bit later one in Saint John, New Brunswick.

Recognizing the potential for confusion amidst these overlapping claims, Lord Dufferin, the governor general, began early in 1877 to raise in public speeches the subject of a real national gallery and national artistic association along the lines of the Royal Academy in London. His successor, the Marquis of Lorne, who pursued the matter forcefully, in 1879 asked both the OSA and the AAM to draw up recommendations for the foundation of a Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA). Each at first believed it had been chosen to be transformed into this august national body, but Lorne soon made it clear that the RCA would embrace the whole Dominion, leaving existing associations and societies intact. He personally chose Lucius O'Brien to be president, with Napoléon Bourassa of Montreal as vice-president, and the inaugural exhibition opened in the national capital, Ottawa, in March 1880. The entire exhibition was subsequently shown in the AAM galleries, and a reduced version was included in the OSA exhibition in Toronto. Although it was planned to exhibit in a different city each year, the tradition was soon

established of showing only in the three major centres — Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto — on a rotating basis.

Since Lorne was also determined to establish a national gallery, he stipulated that a condition of acceptance into the RCA would be the deposit of a “diploma painting” in Ottawa, this collection to be the basis of a national gallery. Space for the growing collection was found in a government building and, in May 1882, Lorne officiated at the opening of the National Gallery of Canada. Its growing collections have been housed in temporary locations in Ottawa ever since. Toronto finally got a permanent public gallery in 1900 with the establishment of the Art Museum of Toronto, later the Art Gallery of Toronto, and now known as the Art Gallery of Ontario.

During the 1860s and 1870s virtually all the artists involved in working toward the national purpose represented by the RCA were landscape painters. Most were British immigrants, although some Germans — notably Otto Jacobi (1812-1901), a Prussian trained at Dusseldorf who was court painter to the Grand Duke of Nassau for almost 20 years before settling in Montreal — as well as some Americans — particularly Robert Duncanson (1817-72), one of the earliest black painters in the United States, and the German-born Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) — had direct influence on the heroic Canadian landscape paintings that dominated exhibitions in the 1870s and 1880s.

In his painting, as in his organizational and administrative abilities, Lucius O'Brien was the natural leader. Canadian-born, he was open to both late Hudson River School work in the United States and landscapes of the highly developed watercolour style popular in England in the 1860s and 1870s. This resulted in broad, light-filled images of vast scale yet with multiplied detail, perfectly suited to the aggressive, expansive spirit then in the air in Canada. Once the transcontinental railway was complete O'Brien and his colleagues flocked to the newly-opened Rocky Mountains, creating hundreds of breathtaking scenes, moving symbols of the potential strength and wealth of this new but rapidly growing nation. It was bombast, but bombast that throbbed with the conviction of genuine aspirations. The future was Canada's and pictures of rail and steam penetrating impossible natural barriers seemed to be the very images of progress.

### *Art instruction*

The RCA maintained the concern of its predecessors for the education of artists, and soon there were art classes in virtually every city in the country. By the early 1890s, the largest and best schools were those run by the AAM in Montreal, and the Ontario School of Art, founded by the OSA in Toronto in 1876. Taken over by the provincial government, and modelled more closely on the South Kensington School in London, the Ontario School

of Art became the central Ontario School of Art and Design in 1891 (and the Ontario College of Art in 1912).

This emphasis upon the teaching of art as a highly developed and systematic discipline inevitably led young painters in the late 1870s and 1880s to Paris, a world centre of art with a sophisticated system of education and selection based on academic studios and annual salons. Popular French painting grew directly from this system, with its emphasis on the close and extensive study of the human figure for the creation of large publicly-oriented 'machines' on grand themes. The first Canadians ventured to Paris to study in the mid-Seventies, and a decade later they were back in Canada. One, Robert Harris (1849-1919), who would later paint the famous *Fathers of Confederation*, was in Toronto as early as 1879, teaching the French method of working from the model and building up compositions from elaborate studies of the parts. This turned a whole generation away from the Canadian landscape in favour of large-scale figure painting. Harris, George Reid (1860-1947), who subsequently taught for many years in Toronto, William Brymner (1855-1925) who was a famed teacher at the AAM Schools in Montreal for 30 years, and Paul Peel (1860-92), who stayed in Paris, are the most typical, and probably the best, of this generation of Canadian academic figure painters.

Their students flocked to the French capital in such numbers that, by the mid-1890s, it would appear that every Canadian artist of any seriousness had to spend at least a year or two there. Some stayed longer and, in a few years, were abandoning academic figure painting for impressionist landscape, or Whistler\*-influenced tonalism. The more successful found it difficult to return home and, as the new century dawned, some of the best of the younger artists could not imagine working anywhere other than Paris. Many thought this a sign that Canadian art had come of age. A few others began to think that a truly Canadian art would never be born.

### *The twentieth century*

There have been two major movements in Canadian art in this century. The Group of Seven in Toronto during the 1920s and the *Automatistes* in Montreal during the late 1940s both captured the imagination of a broad public, each in its time and place seeming to embody national aspirations of the grandest sort. They represent two peaks around which virtually all Canadian art has since revolved, and reflect as well what have been the major tensions in modern Canadian cultural life: those between Toronto and Montreal, between francophone and anglophone, between nationalism and internationalism.

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\* James Abbott McNeil Whistler (1834-1903), an American.

The first consciously 'modern' art in Canada — as distinct from that striving merely to be current — came from those artists who formed the Canadian Art Club (CAC) in Toronto in 1907. The Club, an invitational society, was determined to bring Canadian art 'up to date' by encouraging Canadian painters who had been drawn to Paris to exhibit at home. The annual exhibitions of the OSA and RCA were seen as havens for outdated academicism and, although the CAC in no sense intended to replace these broadly-based bodies, it was meant to act as a corrective, a positive alternative to perceived mediocrity. In this respect it was the first in a new trend in Canadian artists' organizations, selective in membership and committed to specific aesthetic ends.

Although Toronto artists such as Edmund Morris (1871-1913) and Curtis Williamson (1867-1944) were the initiators, the consistent quality and stylistic cohesiveness of the eight exhibitions that were held before dissolution of the club in 1915 can be largely attributed to the inclusion of Montreal painters such as James Wilson Morrice (1865-1924), Maurice Cullen (1866-1934) and Marc Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté (1869-1937). The members presented moody, atmospheric paintings derived variously from impressionism, Whistler and his circle or the Hague School. Even when they worked in Canada (a good number were actively pursuing careers abroad), they tended to stress effects of atmosphere, often limiting their palettes to one or two richly toned hues. This sombre painterliness impressed Canadian collectors with its similarity to the currently popular international mode. But it lacked a sense of place, and it was this failing in the work of the internationalists that another, smaller and younger group of painters in Toronto in the years just before the war rallied to overcome.

### *Expeditions to the bush*

In their concern to develop an idiom that expressed the unique nature of the Canadian experience, the members of this group found common ground around J.E.H. MacDonald (1873-1932) and Lawren S. Harris (1885-1970) during 1912 and 1913. An exhibition of contemporary Scandinavian art viewed in nearby Buffalo, New York, early in 1913, underlined for them the unique nature of northern landscape, and they found in Tom Thomson (1877-1917) — a commercial artist recently turned to painting — the model of the new Canadian artist. The following year their program took concrete form. Housed in the new Studio Building of Canadian Art in Toronto, the assembled painters — Harris, MacDonald, A.Y. Jackson (1882-1974) from Montreal, Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) and Fred Varley (1881-1969), recent immigrants from Sheffield, England, and, of course, Tom Thomson — travelled into the Ontario northern bush around Georgian Bay and Algonquin Park for their inspiration.

The outbreak of war in Europe that summer had, by the following spring, touched them all and, during the next two years, only MacDonald and Thomson remained in Toronto. Thomson in fact spent only the period of the deep winter snows in the city and lived nine months of the year in Algonquin Park, working as a guide or fire ranger during the summer heat and painting hundreds of small, vibrant oil sketches in the spring and autumn. His artistic progress was astonishing, and the myth of the woodsman-artist, his art a seemingly natural consequence of seasonal change, was only enhanced by the mystery of his death by drowning in Algonquin Park in July 1917.

### *The Group of Seven*

There was soon a confirmed belief that Thomson's simple, responsive life in the bush had brought him closer to the 'Canadian' condition than any artist had ever come before. At the same time, his broadly expressive handling of paint and exciting colour sense, bold, yet faithful to local colour, although related to post-impressionism, seemed to his contemporaries in Canada to be a direct response to nature, entirely free of the conventions of European tradition. In a series of memorial exhibitions immediately following the war, his full achievement was, for the first time, presented to the public. Then, in May 1920, Frank Johnston (1888-1949) and Frank Carmichael (1890-1945) joined with Harris, MacDonald, Jackson, Lismer and Varley to exhibit as the Group of Seven.

This first showing of the northern enthusiasts doubtless would have occurred earlier if the war had not intervened. But the Canadian effort in Europe, in which it was widely held that Canada had 'come of age', seemed now to make even more urgent the need that its painting too should demonstrate this new independence and maturity. A distinctively Canadian art for Canadians became the battle-cry of the Group of Seven, and they too embraced as their working method Thomson's special relationship with the land, literally working in the wilderness.

Driven by a sense of mission, they ceaselessly promoted their position by exhibitions in Toronto and across the nation for more than ten years. The initial response to their effort was mild, verging on apathetic. But the Group pressed on, and as they gradually achieved prominence they attracted controversy and passed through the mid-1920s with an air of notoriety that enhanced the sense of their modernity in the public eye. By the end of the 1920s they had generated a considerable artistic following in Toronto and, in fact, a few artists who worked in the Group of Seven manner — a broad, often bold handling of rugged landscape themes, free of impressionistic colouring and texture — could be found in most of the principal cities of the nation.

The Group consciously sought a national role: in the specific landscape they depicted (by 1930 they had sketched on the Pacific Coast, in the Rockies, in the High Arctic, in the Maritimes, as well as in the pre-Cambrian shield north

of the Great Lakes and along the St. Lawrence River); in the scope of their exhibiting policy; and latterly in an expanded membership (which finally included LeMoine FitzGerald (1890-1956) of Winnipeg and Edwin Holgate (1892-1977) of Montreal, as well as A.J. Casson (b. 1898) of Toronto, who replaced Frank Johnston, the only member to resign). But they were still seen outside Ontario as essentially Toronto artists, as yet another manifestation of the cultural and economic dominance of that city. They held their last exhibition in 1931 (although all but MacDonald were around for a retrospective survey staged by the National Gallery of Canada in 1936), and on that occasion announced the desire to expand into a more truly national organization. The first exhibition of this new Canadian Group of Painters (CGP), as it was called, was held in the summer of 1933.

A statement prepared on that occasion stressed the continuity of the new group with Canada's "national" painters, describing the CGP as an "outgrowth" of the Group of Seven. In fact, the CGP exhibitions — held usually in Toronto, but often in Montreal and sometimes in other cities — contained too many repetitions of tired Group of Seven formulae, and soon became indistinguishable from the annual bland shows of the OSA and the RCA. More positively, a few painters exhibiting with the CGP, such as Carl Schaefer (b. 1903) and Charles Comfort (b. 1900) in Toronto, or some of the younger painters around Fred Varley in Vancouver (he had moved there in 1926), were working with landscape in an expressive way that reflected the intense human struggle demanded by the Great Depression. And later in the 1930s, figurative painters in both Toronto and Montreal posited a new direction. But throughout this period and the 1940s — and despite the presence of the highly talented David Milne (1882-1953) on the scene — the dominant personality in Toronto and within the CGP was A.Y. Jackson, affirming the nationalist goals and the landscape mode of the Group of Seven.

### *A Montreal alternative*

During these years of the growth of the Group of Seven and its subsequent near canonization in the CGP, the seeds of an alternative direction were sown in Montreal. The orientation there was French, owing as much to the influence of one great teacher, William Brymner — who, it may be recalled, received his training in Paris in the late 1870s — as to the language and culture of the majority of the populace. Brymner's students were, in fact, mostly anglophone, but virtually all completed their studies in the ateliers of Paris. The interest in the figure this training imparted is evident in the work of many. The influence of the Group of Seven, however, emphasized by the personal relationship the Montreal-born and Brymner-trained A.Y. Jackson enjoyed with most of the



The Woolsey Family — 1809  
*William Berczy (1744-1813)*

Minuet of the Canadians — 1807  
*George Heriot (1766-1844)*





Portrait of Josephine Ouré — c. 1844  
Joseph Légaré (1795-1855)

Oat Harvest — 1896  
Lucius O'Brien (1832-1899)





Wreath of Flowers — 1884

*William Brymner (1855-1925)*



Japanese Dolls and Fan — c. 1889  
*Paul Peel (1860-1892)*



Environs of Tangiers — c. 1911-1912  
*James Wilson Morrice (1865-1924)*



The Solemn Land — 1921  
*James Edward Hervey MacDonald (1873-1932)*



The Jack Pine — 1916-1917  
*Tom Thomson (1877-1917)*



A September Gale, Georgian Bay — 1921  
*Arthur Lismer (1885-1969)*



Blossoming — c. 1952  
Alfred Pellán (b. 1906)



Boy with a Piece of Bread — 1892-1899  
*Ozias Leduc (1864-1955)*



Indian Hut, Queen Charlotte Islands — c. 1930  
*Emily Carr (1871-1945)*



The Visitors — 1967  
*Jean-Paul Lemieux (b. 1904)*



Tall Spread — 1966

*Jack Bush (1909-1977)*



To Prince Edward Island — 1965  
*Alex Colville (b. 1920)*

S.S. Beaumont — 1951  
*Molly Lamb Bobak (b. 1922)*





Silent Force — 1964  
Toni Onley (b. 1928)

Double — 1961  
Ted Godwin (b. 1933)





À mauve ouvert — 1963  
*Jean McEwen (b. 1923)*

Montrealers, drew them all as well to the Group's style of landscape and ultimately into membership in the CGP.

Activities in Montreal thus seemed in the shadow of Toronto until later in the 1930s, when the organizing of one remarkable man began to focus those unique characteristics Montreal painters brought to Canadian art. John Lyman (1886-1967), the son of a prominent anglophone family, received his art training in Paris before the First World War, where he made the acquaintance of another, older Montrealer, James Wilson Morrice, and studied briefly with an associate of Morrice's, Henri Matisse. When he finally returned to settle in Montreal, late in 1931 (the expatriate's life appealed to him as it had to Morrice), Lyman was, then, firmly committed to an aesthetic of "pure" painting, free, he believed, of any content beyond its own formal excellence.

The adulation accorded the Group of Seven in Canada amazed him. Its emphasis on the adventurous exploration of the Canadian landscape — which was almost alone responsible for attracting public approbation — seemed to him to have nothing to do with the art of painting, and he knew that the national aspirations of the Group, whose members were acclaimed as the only truly Canadian artists, precluded the acceptance of painters who were as accomplished. "The real adventure takes place in the sensibility and imagination of the individual," he wrote early in 1932. "The real trail must be blazed towards a perception of the universal relations that are present in every parcel of creation, not towards the Arctic circle."

### *Contemporary Art Society*

Lyman advanced his views at every opportunity as an art critic, in teaching, and ultimately, in December 1938, at the first exhibition of the Eastern Group, when he was joined by Goodridge Roberts (1904-1974) and a few other painters from Montreal who shared his belief in formal painting values and his taste for the *École de Paris*. By then convinced that the CGP was incapable of adapting to a rapidly changing world, he called a meeting out of which was born the Contemporary Art Society (CAS), devoted to the promotion on a broad base of a living modern art. Comprising lay members and professional artists — as had been the Canadian Art Club that had attempted a generation earlier to connect with contemporary international trends — CAS held its first exhibition in Montreal in December 1939. Important as a support for individual painters of talent, such as Goodridge Roberts, and for its program of public education through exhibitions of post-Fauve painting, the CAS soon became the single most active forum for the expression of the aspirations of a community of young francophone artists who were developing in the *École des Beaux-Arts de Montréal* and the *École du Meuble*.

## *Surrealism*

The stimulation for this development — and very soon the leadership — came from two teachers: Alfred Pellán (b. 1906) at the *Beaux-Arts* and Paul-Émile Borduas (1905-60) at the *École du Meuble*. Pellán had recently turned to teaching after some 14 years in Paris. The German invasion had forced his return to Canada early in 1940, and almost immediately, in June, he was given a large retrospective exhibition at the *Musée du Québec*, shown in Montreal in October. Pellán's Parisian eclecticism found firm support in the CAS, his Miro-like surrealist abstraction in particular seeming to spring vigorously from the ground so carefully prepared by Lyman and his associates.

Borduas too had studied in Paris. But whereas Pellán had adopted the essentially foreign culture of café life, for Borduas in 1929 the experience — as a student of Maurice Denis' *Ateliers d'Art Sacré* — affirmed the conservative route he had been following for eight years. At the age of 16 he had been apprenticed to Ozias Leduc (1864-1955), a remarkable church decorator, and in private life a Symbolist painter and poet. Leduc's fervent sense of calling inspired Borduas to persist as a religious painter for almost 20 years, during which the genre literally died away in Quebec.

At the same time there was growing slowly but steadily among the francophone community the basic structures for secular cultural activity. These included a conservative but broadly-based system of government-supported art schools instituted in the early 1920s and in 1933 the establishment of the *Musée du Québec*, in Quebec City. The design school in Montreal, the *École du Meuble*, had attracted a more outward-looking staff by the late 1930s than had the *École des Beaux-Arts*, and it was upon joining the staff of the former in 1937 that Borduas's outlook began to broaden. Colleagues there encouraged his involvement in the larger art world of Montreal; when the CAS was formed he was elected vice-president. By the time of Pellán's showing of his French paintings in 1940, Borduas was technically and intellectually in a position to respond. And respond he did, with a force that ultimately reverberated far beyond the limited circles of artists.

## *Modernism in Vancouver*

Modernism came to British Columbia on the West Coast as early as 1912. But it was a false start. That year in Vancouver — a city that had been established only some 25 years earlier — Emily Carr (1871-1945) exhibited Fauve-like paintings she had completed while studying in France the previous year. Received with interest, a show the following April of scenes of local Indian life painted with a similar boldness of colour and broad brushwork, elicited a negative response. Carr later claimed that, as a consequence, she was ex-

cluded from the small art circle there (centred on the British Columbia Society of Fine Arts, founded in 1909), so she moved back to Victoria, her home town, and virtually abandoned painting.

Fred Varley of the Group of Seven helped re-introduce a concern for modernism when he moved to Vancouver from Toronto in 1926 to take a position with the newly-established Vancouver School of Art (VSA). The following year Emily Carr was invited to show her early paintings in Ottawa (and subsequently Toronto and Montreal) in an exhibition of Indian and white art of the West Coast organized by the National Gallery of Canada. She travelled east for the opening late in 1927, and in Toronto met some of the members of the Group of Seven. Deeply moved, she returned to Victoria recommitted to the art of painting at the age of 57. She soon laid aside Indian themes and, encouraged by Harris in particular, achieved great success in communicating the surging fullness of the British Columbia rain forests.

But it was around Varley and an associate of his at the VSA, Jock Macdonald (1897-1960), a Scottish-born and trained designer, that a substantial art scene was established that has continued to this day. It had, as could be expected, a distinct bias towards landscape and virtually all the serious painters were members of the CGP. Macdonald, however, began experimenting with abstractions as early as 1934, a pursuit encouraged by Lawren Harris after he settled in Vancouver in 1940, for he had turned to abstraction in the mid-1930s. Harris was involved with seeking a spiritual mode — he was a theosophist — and introduced Macdonald to Kandinsky's writings. Macdonald had also begun to read the surrealists and, coincidentally with Borduas in Montreal, began to experiment with automatic painting. He left Vancouver in 1946 to teach in Calgary, and then Toronto the following year, where his painting and his passion as a teacher would help ignite a fire then smouldering beneath the dead hand of the CGP.

## Part 2 — Painting in Canada since the Second World War

The visual arts in Canada through the 1930s were at a low ebb. With restricted public interest and concern, limited and conservative private support, the interchange of ideas and the stimulus of debate in opposition to the *status quo* came from small, isolated communities of artists across the country.

The modernist breakthrough in the 1940s came from francophone artists in Montreal, and they set cultural and aesthetic directions in Quebec to which both the art and intentions of the CGP were irrelevant.

### *Conflicting directions*

The initiative of John Lyman, particularly in the formation of the Contemporary Art Society, was vital in giving focus to the community in Montreal. But it was a focus that soon emphasized conflicting directions. Pellán's synthesis of Parisian surrealism and cubism went beyond Lyman's affiliation with the *École de Paris*; and Borduas, in the early 1940s, began to assert even more radical theoretical and formal positions. Pellán believed that Canadian artists must first gain for themselves what had already been established in Europe; *le rattrapage du retard*, they must "catch up". Borduas, deeply impressed by André Breton's surrealism, demanded direct and independent action in response to the immediate cultural situation.

The dispute between Pellán and Borduas, a division of personalities and principles, polarized the avant-garde (collapsing the CAS in the process), and was formalized in Borduas's *Automatiste* group and the *Prisme d'yeux* led by Pellán. Borduas wrote, "Pellán completely rejected surrealism which for us has been the great discovery", (1943) and the manifesto of *Prisme d'yeux* criticized the *Automatistes* by saying, "We seek a painting freed from all accident of time and place, and of restrictive ideology;..." (1948). The *Automatiste* group coalesced at the time of the 1943 *Les Sagittaires* exhibition, a show by young artists, the majority of whom were students or associates of Borduas. The core group around Borduas, which included Fernand Leduc (b. 1916) and Jean-Paul Riopelle (b. 1923), began exhibiting their abstract surrealist paintings together in the mid-1940s; in 1947, a critic named the group *les Automatistes*. The group's contacts with the French surrealists were strengthened by the moves of Riopelle and Leduc to Paris in 1946 and 1947 respectively.

The high point of the *Automatiste* movement came in 1948 with the group's publication of a book whose central text was Borduas' *Refus global*. The essay was vigorously, often bitterly, debated not only among artists but in broader intellectual and political circles; it crystallized the complex tensions in Quebec society, between the authoritarian provincial government of Maurice Duplessis, the Church's control of education and thought there, the movement for centralist reform, and appeals in Quebec nationalism. Despite Borduas's insistence that his call was for spiritual revolution and not direct political action, it was read by many as inciting opposition to Quebec's political and religious institutions; "The religion of Christ," he wrote, "has dominated the universe. Look at what has happened to it: the sister faiths turning into exploiting little sisters." And "Our duty is simple: to break definitively with all conventions of society and its utilitarian spirit!"

The outcome was swift, Borduas was dismissed from the *École du Meuble*. He was already facing opposition from the *Prisme d'yeux* and members of the CAS and soon there were differences among the *Automatistes* over the interpretations of surrealism and the relationship between the Montreal and Paris movements. Through this, Borduas's reputation as a painter continued to grow, but the strain of his personal situation became intolerable and, in 1953, he decided on a period of self-imposed exile. He spent some time in New York and then, in 1955, moved to Paris where he died in 1960. His later work, affected by his contact with New York abstract expressionism, shifted from a surrealist illusion of space to a more emphatic plastic and painterly structure.

This shift was signalled in Montreal art through the 1950s, particularly towards a formal approach that traced its roots to Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Russian and Dutch painters respectively. Expression of these concerns came from the young critic and painter Rodolphe de Repentigny (1926-59) who, with three other artists, formed *les Plasticiens* in 1954. Their work, however, was immediately surpassed by the more rigorous approach of others, notably Fernand Leduc, back in Montreal during the years 1953-59, and two very young artists, Guido Molinari (b. 1933) and Claude Tousignant (b. 1932), who developed paintings of uncompromising hard edge abstraction and powerful saturated colour.

If the radical edge of painting in Montreal into the 1960s was marked by hard-edge abstraction it was only one aspect of the Quebec scene. Pellan, who moved to Quebec City, continued as a major figure as did others of the *Prisme d'yeux* group, notably Goodridge Roberts and Jacques de Tonnancour (b. 1917). Riopelle settled permanently in France and became one of the first modern Canadian artists to gain a major reputation in Europe and the United States. And standing apart from the Montreal debates and movements

is Jean Paul Lemieux (b. 1904), the doyen of Quebec painting, whose paintings of the landscape and the people of the province have come to symbolize the life and traditions of rural Quebec.

### *Painters Eleven*

The situation in Toronto during the 1940s and 1950s was similar to Montreal's in the emergence of an active opposition to the *status quo*, but quite different in the approach that opposition took and the art it manifested. The influence on taste and exhibition opportunities held by the Group of Seven, the CGP and the Ontario Society of Artists, was pervasive. Reaction formed around independent exhibitions with the turning point coming in 1953 when William Ronald (b. 1926) organized an exhibition with six other artists at the Robert Simpson Company. They decided to work together on further shows and, adding four more to their number, formed the Painters Eleven in November 1953. The group, which exhibited together between 1954 and 1960, combined established artists like Jock Macdonald and Jack Bush (1909-77) and young painters like Oscar Cahen (1916-56), William Ronald and Harold Town (b. 1924). Their published statements denied a unified theoretical or stylistic direction, "There is no manifesto here for the times...there is little harmony in the noticeable disagreement. But there is a profound regard for the consequences of our complete freedom." (1954).

The very differences within the group, and they were many, probably gave its attack on entrenched conservatism swifter access to attention than if it had asserted a single-minded direction. The interest, particularly among the younger artists, in New York abstract expressionism was evident and the group exhibited with the American Abstract Artists in New York in 1956. The New York contact, however, became a point of dissension within the group and carried significant implications for Toronto art in the 1950s and 1960s. The issue arose in 1957 when Ronald, then living in New York, arranged for the critic, Clement Greenberg, to visit the artists' studios. Harold Town and Walter Yarwood refused to participate, and the impact on the other artists was limited or negligible with the exception of Bush, for whom the meeting was the beginning of a life-long friendship.

The breakthrough made by Painters Eleven collectively and individually, had an inestimable impact on art in Toronto. It was inseparable from the development of a progressive scene and the emergence of a wider and more responsive audience for new art. Although institutional resistance remained, impetus was developed by a number of Toronto private galleries showing contemporary art, notably the Park Gallery, the Gallery of Contemporary Art, the Greenwich Gallery (later the Isaacs Gallery), the Here and Now Gallery

and, in the 1960s, the Mirvish Gallery and the Carmen Lamanna Gallery. By the late 1950s a range of artists, slightly younger than Painters Eleven, began to exhibit, a number of the most important becoming associated with the Isaacs Gallery, notably Michael Snow (b. 1929), Joyce Wieland (b. 1931), Graham Coughtry (b. 1931), Gordon Rayner (b. 1935), John Meredith (b. 1933), and Dennis Burton (b. 1933).

### *Eastern artists*

The isolation that characterized Montreal and Toronto in the 1930s and 1940s was more severe in the Maritimes and the West. The two most original artists in the East both lived in Saint John, New Brunswick: Jack Humphrey (1901-67) and Miller Brittain (1912-68) received their training in the United States, and became members of the CAS. Their work was focused on their immediate situation, Brittain's views of everyday life influenced by the Americans Reginald Marsh and Raphael Soyer. In 1945, Brittain was appointed an official war artist. The war art program, involving artists from across the country, was of special importance for the younger painters, four of whom have had a major impact on art in the East — Lawren P. Harris (b. 1910), Alex Colville (b. 1920), Bruno Bobak (b. 1923) and Molly Lamb Bobak (b. 1923). Alex Colville taught at Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, from 1946-63 and moved to Wolfville, Nova Scotia, in 1971. He has become one of the best known and appreciated of Canadian artists both here and in Europe, being described by one London critic as "perhaps the most important realist (painter) in the western world". His work and his teaching have been important factors in the work of others, among them Christopher Pratt (b. 1935) and Mary Pratt (b. 1935) who were students at Mount Allison. More recently the most radical developments in the East have centred on the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. Since Garry Neill Kennedy (b. 1935) became its president in 1967, it has become noted for the experimental and progressive work of its staff and students and as a forum of critical debate with artists and critics from Canada, the United States and Europe.

### *Western artists*

In contrast to the general situation in the East, and although the early years were as inauspicious, art in the West has subsequently shown a more vigorous development. The art schools in the West played a substantial part in the absence, until recent years, of more widely based art communities. Vancouver had to adjust to the loss of two leading figures; Fred Varley moved to Ottawa in 1936 and Jock Macdonald went to Calgary in 1946 and the next year to Toronto to teach at the OCA. The major roles at the Vancouver School of Art were taken over by Jack Shadbolt (b. 1909) and B.C. Binning (1909-76);

Shadbolt taught there from 1938 to 1966, with an absence for war service, and Binning, influenced by the purism teachings of Amédée Ozenfant, from 1934-49, before he moved to the University of British Columbia. Shadbolt has been the single most important figure in west coast art since the war through his work, his teaching and his active involvement in the community. Engaging the range of modernist approaches, and a deep regard for the craft and mysticism of Northwest Coast Indian art, he has expressed a “lyrical vision” of the richness of the west coast landscape. The landscape has been the most vital subject in much west coast art, with such varied approaches as those of E.J. Hughes (b. 1913), of Toni Onley (b. 1928), Gordon Smith (b. 1919) and of Takao Tanabe (b. 1926), who, since 1973 has headed the art department at the Banff School of Fine Arts in Alberta.

Jock Macdonald's brief stay in Calgary brought him into contact with the small core of artists who formed “The Calgary Group”. The central figure was Maxwell Bates (1906-80), an architect and painter strongly influenced by the German expressionists, in particular Max Beckmann, with whom he studied in New York.

The most remarkable developments on the Prairies in the 1950s and 1960s came in Saskatchewan, at the Regina College School of Art (now the University of Saskatchewan, Regina) and the Emma Lake Workshops. Through the 1950s a group of young artists gathered in Regina; Kenneth Lochhead (b. 1926), Arthur Mackay (b. 1926), Roy Kiyooka (b. 1926), Ted Godwin (b. 1933), Ronald Bloore (b. 1925) as the director of the Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, and Douglas Morton (b. 1926). Lochhead suggested the summer school program at Emma Lake (established 1936) be extended to include an artists' workshop under the leadership of a major invited artist. Shadbolt led the first workshop in 1955, Joseph Plaskett (b. 1918) the second. In 1957 Will Barnett was invited, setting a pattern for inviting non-Canadians; Barnett Newman went in 1959, Clement Greenberg, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski in the early 1960s.

The early workshops brought artists in the region into contact with developments in the major centres; those in the 1960s had a significant impact on Prairies' art by establishing links with American formalist painting and sculpture, an impact whose influence continues to flourish, particularly in Saskatoon and Edmonton.

The Regina group gained national prominence when an exhibition for the Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery in 1960 was organized by Bloore that included himself, Lochhead, Mackay, Godwin, Morton and a Regina architect, Clifford Wiens (Kiyooka had moved to Vancouver in 1959). The exhibition was circulated in 1961 by the National Gallery (excluding Wiens) as *Five Painters* from Regina. It was significant in identifying a strong group of abstract artists

on the Prairies, closely aware of new art from New York, and drew attention to the Emma Lake Workshops. Through the 1960s Lochhead, Bloore, and Morton moved away and Saskatoon became the more vital community with the landscape painters Ernest Lindner (b. 1897), Wyona Mulcaster (b. 1915), Dorothy Knowles (b. 1927) and Reta Cowley (b. 1910); and abstract painters William Perehudoff (b. 1919) and Otto Rogers (b. 1935), both of whom strongly reflect landscape interests in their work.

### *Abstract work*

The rigorous abstraction developed in the late 1950s in Montreal was dominant through the 1960s in the work of Molinari and Claude Tousignant, Rita Letendre (b. 1928), Ulysse Comtois (b. 1931) and others, while Jean McEwen (b. 1923) maintained more painterly, textured surfaces. Two other artists, both of major importance, were Yves Gaucher (b. 1934) — first a print-maker, and then from 1964, a painter of large-scale abstract canvases — and Charles Gagnon (b. 1934) a painter, photographer and film-maker with a sharply critical approach to the means and content of art-making. In the later 1960s a younger generation began to challenge these positions, relating the questioning raised by conceptual art to the local situation. Whereas some, like Christian Knudsen (b. 1945) and Leopold Plotek (b. 1948) continued to paint, others adopted a variety of media; camera art, for instance, by artists like William Vazan (b. 1933), Suzy Lake (b. 1947), Pierre Boogaerts (b. 1946), and Serge Tousignant (b. 1942); sculpture and installations by Betty Goodwin (b. 1923), Irene Whittome (b. 1942), Roland Poulin (b. 1940), Claude Mongrain (b. 1948), and others.

In Toronto there was an equivalent shift of direction. The expressionist and often figurative painting of Town, Ronald and the “Isaacs Group” remained prominent through the 1960s and was extended by the approaches of Gershon Iskowitz (b. 1921) with his abstractions from landscape, Louis de Niverville’s (b. 1933) personal iconography and William Kurelek’s (1927-77) religious paintings and reflection of the Canadian landscape. Further, younger abstract colour painters, such as David Bolduc (b. 1945), John MacGregor (b. 1944), Alex Cameron (b. 1947), Paul Fournier (b. 1939) and Joseph Drapell (b. 1940) began to show in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The rejection of painterly concerns, however, was already apparent, above all in the work of Michael Snow in film, sculpture and photoworks, and Joyce Wieland, and Les Levine (b. 1935) an Irish artist, who worked in Toronto from 1958 to 1964. There was also the emergence, particularly in Vancouver and Toronto, of communications art, for instance of Iain Baxter and Michael Morris, and performance and video art.

## *Other media*

Although painting remained the concern of many artists through the 1970s, the most radical moves were made by artists working in other media: for instance the three-artist group General Idea, formed in 1968; the installations of Ian Carr-Harris (b. 1941), Noel Harding (b. 1945) and John Massey (b. 1950); the sculpture of Colette Whiten (b. 1945) and Robin Collyer (b. 1949); the videos of Colin Campbell (b. 1942) and Lisa Steele (b. 1947); and the performance works of Max Dean (b. 1949) and Elizabeth Chitty (b. 1953). These new developments emerged, for the most part, outside the public museums and private galleries, through artist-run spaces (alternative or parallel galleries) that, through the 1970s, developed into a country-wide network.

During the 1960s London, Ontario also developed as an important centre of creative activity, though with close ties to the situation in Toronto and to the opportunities for exhibition there. A major statement of this activity came in a 1968 exhibition, *The Heart of London* that included, among others, Jack Chambers (1931-78), Greg Curnoe (b. 1936), John Boyle (b. 1941), David Rabinowitch (b. 1943), Royden Rabinowitch (b. 1943), Tony Urquhart (b. 1934), Murray Favro (b. 1940) and Ron Martin (b. 1943) all of whom have been major figures in the development of recent Canadian art. Chambers, a realist painter of unique qualities, also founded Canadian Artists Representation in 1967, an initiative that developed into a national organization, to assert the status of professional artists and establish fee structures for the exhibition and reproduction of works of art. In 1969 Paterson Ewen moved to London from Montreal and there developed the major landscape paintings by which his reputation is now established.

## *The Canada Council*

The expansion of activity that marked every region in the 1970s continues to characterize the visual arts in the 1980s. The number of working artists, the output of exhibitions and of writing on the arts and — despite the still limited range of the market — the number of private galleries devoted to contemporary art has continued to grow. The place of the Canada Council in this development has been seminal. Founded in 1957 as a federal agency to support the arts at all levels, the Council's impact on the visual arts, through grants to public institutions, to artist-run galleries and to individual artists, and by the founding of the Art Bank in 1972, has been substantial. The implications of reduced funding to the Canada Council, a process begun in the late 1970s, are legion and threaten the progress in cultural identity and artistic quality that has been gained over the past 30 years.

The growing activity in the larger centres has led to a diversity of con-

cerns, and whereas previously it was possible to identify a small group of artists in a particular place as the leading edge of new art, this is no longer as clearly described. Along with this has come a more confident approach, and more complex responses, to the relationship between international developments and regional or localized concerns. The interests of many younger artists in Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto in figurative or image painting in recent years can be paralleled with similar moves in European and American art. But whereas, previously, such a relationship might be described — even if simplistically — as derivative, it now demands closer attention to the interweaving of such parallels with the local situations and their own histories. For instance, it is clear that current figurative painting bears important relationships to developments in video, performance and installation works from the later 1960s; and in these aspects Canadian artists have made special and widely recognized contributions.

The definition of a Canadian art remains as elusive as the Canadian identity, an identity of shifting political and economic forces based on a federation of distinct regions. What is demanded, and what must now be possible, is the culture's evaluation based on the awareness of its unique history; a political and cultural history that marks the transformation from a series of outposts for European colonizing ambitions to a dynamic complex of independence, dependencies and regional differences. The emergence of strength in the arts over the past 40 years is, if nothing else, a vital reflection of the need to make conscious that transformation.







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